

Study unearths blacks' Island history

By ELAINE BOIES

They farmed the land, dragged the seashore for clams and oysters, forged iron bars into horseshoes, dug up the rich clay and fired it into bricks, sawed, nailed and coaxed lumber into houses. They grew spectacular prize-winning flowers, sent their children briefly to school, found

encouragement in church and promise of a better life in "The Old Rugged Cross."

They were the mid-18th century settlers of Rossville, on the eastern shore of the Arthur Kill, and though they made significant contributions to Staten Island's history and development, little mention is made of their existence in written reports of the period.

Now, with the introduction of a continuing study called "The Black Man on Staten Island," they have been discovered, their photographs resurrected from family attics, their descendants recorded in taped interviews.

Clarence Overton, a Mariners Harbor potter whose forebears were among the early Rossville residents, originated the project four years ago with the help and interest of his students at The Potter's Wheel, a community arts center he founded in Port Richmond.

With the support of the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, the Board of Education and a \$35,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the first segment of the history has been packaged in multimedia wrappings for its debut on the school and museum lecture circuit.

Photos, slides, audio and video tapes illustrate Overton's

lecture on "Sandy Grounds," as the area was known then. Interviews with present-day descendants of the Unter, Pedro and Bishop families, who still live there, reveal most of the original inhabitants migrated from eastern Maryland.

Census figures and church logs start cataloging the black community circa 1840. Overton believes its existence dates back even further than that, and is confident his study will unearth still older records.

For now, the most important — and exciting — part of the history has been handed down in the oral tradition by the 22 remaining residents of "Sandy Grounds." Urban Corps students from Richmond College and some from Staten Island Community College, where Overton is adjunct assistant professor in the performing and creative arts department, have preserved these interviews on tape, and they have been further transcribed into thousands of printed words.

Last summer, Bob Miller, who works at the Port Richmond Library, filmed a section of the area with the help of students in his videotape workshop.

Taken as a whole, the material displays an energetic, hard-working, productive community, aware of them-

selves as "freed" men, proud, but without rancor towards a white population that largely ignored them.

"This is the way the Lord meant it to be for us," is what the last Rossville residents tell their young interviewers, when asked to express their feelings. But privately, they share great joy and pride in today's young blacks who proclaim their beauty, and their importance.

"The point is," Overton says, "in three to five years, this community will be extinct. It's cut by the West Shore Expressway on one side and the Distrigas development on the other.

"I'm trying to get young black and white kids today to understand we have a heritage — and they should be proud of it. This is not just another black study; it's a real contribution to history.

"Our history has been the history of George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington, but you see, the thing is, our history is here ... on Staten Island. We built the bridges, we helped farm the land, we helped contribute the way every other racial and national group did."

And now, after four years of investigating, studying, interviewing, collecting and recording, Overton has an arsenal of material to prove it.



A collection of antique and contemporary photographs being examined by Clarence Overton helps define the history of black people on Staten Island.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons